

Robert D. Novak

Term Limit Turnaround

The extent to which the House Republican leadership has broken faith with voters on term limits is measured by Speaker Newt Gingrich's remarkable tactical switch.

A month ago, Gingrich saw a clear way to avoid a bloody collision between the Republican Party and the term-limits movement. He would back a statute—requiring only a simple majority to pass—that would authorize states to determine the maximum duration of congressional service. But he now has withdrawn his support. As a result, amending the Constitution will be the only option, and that will fall short of the needed two-thirds vote next Tuesday.

The "Contract With America" clause most popular with Republican voters will be rejected because it is least popular with Republican politicians. The impact will be immediate, violent and enduring. Such is the bitter fruit harvested when politicians pretend to support something they really oppose.

"I feel sold out," Howe Rich, the New York businessman who heads the U.S. Term Limits organization, told me. "We had an agreement from the speaker of the House to support the bill to let states set the limits, but he decided not to do it." As for Gingrich's view of U.S. Term Limits, the speaker told me: "They don't have a clue about how to run this country."

The term-limits movement was vital to the Republicans' capture of the House, but deep disagreements were muted during the campaign. A six-year limit for

House service, the number approved by most of 22 state ballot propositions, is insisted on by U.S. Term Limits. Republican leaders profess to want 12 years, but it is clear they prefer no limits at all.

Civil war between the GOP and term limiters threatened early in January when Rep. Bill McCollum of Florida, principal House Republican sponsor of term limits, called for federal preemption of state-imposed limits. But Sen. Hank Brown of Colorado, voluntarily limiting himself to six years in the Senate, on Jan. 24 introduced a statute saying "each state may prescribe the number of terms a person may be elected" to Congress no matter what the Supreme Court decides in a pending suit on constitutionality of state propositions.

Gingrich saw this as a federalist approach, needing only a simple majority of 218 votes, instead of 290 for a constitutional amendment. At his Feb. 8 press conference, he spoke favorably of the Brown bill: "I am very committed to doing everything we can to help the term-limits movement. We have an obligation there. It's what we campaigned on." On Feb. 14, meeting with U.S. Term Limits, the speaker endorsed the Brown bill. So, what changed his mind? "The more I thought about it," Gingrich told me, "the more I concluded, this is crazy... trying to run this place on a six-year term. It would be genuinely destructive of the country." That is precisely the position taken by other Republican leaders who opposed term limits from the start. Sen.

Robert Dole, Sen. Trent Lott, Sen. Orrin Hatch, Rep. Tom Delay and Rep. Henry Hyde.

But that runs counter to what Republican voters asked for Nov. 8 and what newly elected Republicans are demanding now. Rep. Mark Sanford, a 34-year-old real estate broker, won nomination for a South Carolina House seat against the heavily favored Van Hipp, a former state party chairman, by pledging to quit after six years in the House. Now, Sanford has introduced a House version of the Brown bill in defiance of the powerful speaker.

In contrast to disciplined procedures for other contract items, the House next week will consider a mishmash of conflicting term-limits proposals. The version approved by the Judiciary Committee is a monstrosity sponsored by Republican Rep. George Gekas of Pennsylvania to permit 12 years in the House, a two-year break, followed by a second 12 years, while preempting all state-imposed limits. The Brown-Sanford approach will not be considered.

The price will be high. Republican strategist William Kristol worries that defeat for term limits and victory for tort reform "will expose Republicans to the charge that they only fight hard to pass things that big business wants." He asserts that term limits "will result in more deficit reduction than the balanced budget amendment." That's a message Republican leaders prefer not to hear.